

OVERHEARD IN THE ACADEMY

Crisis, Opportunity, Danger? Mark C. Taylor's "End the University as We Know It"

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As no doubt all too many academics do not need to be reminded, the recent and ongoing economic crisis has many colleges and universities running scared—cutting budgets and courses, if not faculty and programs, freezing salaries and new hires, warily watching every dollar and every report of the latest “economic indicators,” as well as buzzwords. This is the context for the bombshell opening sentences of Mark C. Taylor’s April 26, 2009 *New York Times* op-ed, “End the University as We Know It.” “Graduate education,” Taylor wrote,

is the Detroit of higher learning. Most graduate programs in American universities produce a product for which there is no market (candidates for teaching positions that do not exist) and develop skills for which there is diminishing demand (research in subfields within subfields and publication in journals read by no one other than a few like-minded colleagues), all at a rapidly rising cost (sometimes well over \$100,000 in student loans).

What, then, are we to do? Taylor went on to propose six reforms, among which doing away with “[t]he division-of-labor model of separate departments” in favor of multidisciplinary “problem-centered programs,” and abolishing tenure in favor of multiyear contracts.

Of course, Taylor—long a professor of religion at Williams College, more recently chair of the religion department at Columbia University—is hardly a lone voice in his criticism of what Alasdair MacIntyre, to name another critic, has called “the fragmentation of the American university.” MacIntyre, in an article published in *Commonweal* in 2006 under the title “The End of Education,” noted that “[e]ach part of the curriculum is someone’s responsi-

bility, but no one has a responsibility for making the connections between the parts” (MacIntyre 2006, 11).¹ MacIntyre’s focus in this article is undergraduate education; if the claim to be “the Detroit of higher learning” is taken, perhaps we could say that, for MacIntyre, undergraduate education is the IKEA of higher learning, where the job of assembly falls to the student—only without instructions.

Taylor’s proposals have provoked, predictably, much discussion, celebration, and consternation; the *Times*’ online site lists 437 readers’ comments, and a quick Google search shows bloggers found yet more to say. *Expositions* has asked four scholars to reflect more deliberately on Taylor’s criticisms and proposals. Though it appears, *pace* popular opinion, not to be an “ancient Chinese proverb,” perhaps there is still, after all, opportunity in crisis, in this instance for higher education. Or perhaps there is only danger.

Note

1. Compare MacIntyre 2009, 135 and 174.

References

MacIntyre, Alasdair.

- 2009 *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- 2006 The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University. *Commonweal* 133(18), (October 20, 2006): 10–14.